THE SACRED JOURNEY

3. Confidence

March 25, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
John 9:1-11
1 Samuel 16:1-13

"...the Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." -1 Samuel 16:7b (RSV)

Harvey Cox, professor of Theology at Harvard Divinity School, who has written a number of fine books on theology and culture, wrote a short memoir a few years ago about his personal faith experience under the title, "Just As I Am." Cox, whose theology is broad, liberal, full of life and has a passion for peace and justice in the world, grew up in a small conservative Baptist Church in Pennsylvania. He recalls that church with fondness and respect and remembers singing the old gospel hymn, "Just as I am, without one plea, But that Thy blood was shed for me."

He reflects: "Though the words may sound lachrymose to many, for me they still convey a sense of comfort and assurance. Was I really acceptable to God 'just as I am?' Was it true that I needed no improvements, no alterations... If true that was very good news to an adolescent who was always being reminded... of my shortcomings and defects."

And then this distinguished intellectual recalls those hazardous days. He wasn't very good at sports, there were better musicians in the band, the girls preferred other fellows. He wasn't the smartest, and although he was sure his parents loved him, he was not at all sure he would ever live up to their expectations.

"But God accepted me just as I am?

"That was not judgment but good news. Years later, when I read Paul Tillich's famous sermon, 'You are Accepted,' I knew exactly what it meant, and I could hear the melody of the old hymn still humming on in the back of my mind." [Just As I Am, p. 151-152]

Life, I have been proposing on these Sundays of Lent, is like a journey, a faith journey, a journey made sacred by the one who calls us to it, travels with us, and provides for our needs along the way.

We have thought about Sarah and Abraham who hear a summons to let go of their securities, pick up and move; they actually do it, actually trust God with their future and the adventure begins.

And we thought about the children of Israel "murmuring in the wilderness" and wishing they were back where there was food and water. And we entertained the notion that when you do walk away from whatever provides you security, when you acknowledge your ultimate vulnerability, the emptiness of your hands - God provides.

So, this morning, Confidence - the sense that we can do it, can be faithful, can live up to our potential, can be true to the end. And another great story: this one about a man who would be and was King, Israel's most memorable leader, David. It is a magnificent saga. It has all the elements of a gripping novel or soap opera: intrigue, conspiracy, lots of sex and violence, family tragedy... Joseph Heller has written an irreverent but affectionate novel about the career of this remarkable man, God Knows. In it David says, "I don't like to boast, but I honestly think I've got the best story in the Bible. Old Sarah's fun, Abraham is ever up to the mark, Moses isn't bad, I have to admit, but he's very, very long with all those laws. Moses has the Ten Commandments, it's true, but I have better lines. I've got the poetry and the passion." [p. 5]

I want to focus on the beginning of the story but it helps to put it in the context of his remarkable life. Several centuries have passed since the Exodus and the wandering in the wilderness. Israel's **Sacred Journey** has brought them to the land and now a monarchy is forming. Israel's first King, Saul, will start the unification of the Kingdom. David will succeed him and in several years forge a powerful nation-state out of twelve loosely organized tribes of wandering Semites. It is one of the major political and military achievements in all of history. David had to have been a brilliant strategist, an inspiring leader. He was also one of the most human characters in the Bible. David conquers, establishes Jerusalem as the capital of the Kingdom, makes it the center of the nation's religious life, leads worship there - dancing naked before the Lord. David, married to Saul's daughter, falls in love with Bathsheba; she becomes pregnant; he arranges for her husband's death, marries Bathsheba; the child dies shortly after birth. David's grief is intense and public, but not as intense and public as a later grief when his son, Absalom, leads an armed insurrection against him and is murdered in order to save David. "Absalom, oh my son Absalom," he cries in one of the most poignant tragedies in all of literature.

And if you can stay with this story and aren't too embarrassed or scandalized by its humanness and earthiness, what comes through is a sense that if God can stay with David, can accept David and love him like a son - in spite of everything David does - just maybe there is room in the Kingdom for you and me. Just maybe there is a place in the wideness of God's love and grace and therefore room for a little confidence.

The story could not begin more modestly. Saul is through. God's man Samuel is scouring the countryside looking for a new king. If he knows who he's looking for, no one else does. He goes to Bethlehem to see a man who has a lot of sons.

And now we're ready to hear the lesson, from the 16th chapter of 1 Samuel:

> "The Lord said to Samuel, 'How long will you grieve over Saul, seeing I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.' And Samuel said, 'How can I go? If Saul hears it, he will kill me.' And the Lord said, 'Take a heifer with you, and say, "I have come to sacrifice to the Lord." And invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me him whom I name to you.' Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, 'Do you come peaceably?' And he said, 'Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; consecrate yourselves, and come with me to the sacrifice.' And he consecrated Jesse and his sons, and invited them to the sacrifice.
>
> "When they came, he looked on Eli'ab and thought, 'Surely the Lord's anointed is before him.' But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.' Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. And he said, 'Neither has the Lord chosen this one.' Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, 'Neither has the Lord chosen this one.' And Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. And Samuel said to Jesse, 'The Lord has not chosen those.' And Samuel said to Jesse, 'Are all your sons here?' And he said, 'There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep.' And Samuel said to Jesse, 'Send and fetch him; for we will not sit down till he comes here.' And he sent, and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. And the Lord said, 'Arise, anoint him; for this is he.' Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward."

The point is that the one who would appear least qualified is the one God wants to be King. Eli'ab had what it takes. Even Samuel was impressed. But God has other ideas. The point is that there is a dynamic at work in this situation, a dynamic built into the nature of reality, we believe, called grace. God is operating with a different set of criteria. God, this magnificent old text tells us from across 3,500 years, "sees not as (we) see." We look on outward appearances. God looks on the heart. So Jesse's strapping sons are rejected. God wants the little one, the child

out in the field. Some later writer can't resist telling us that David was actually quite handsome. But the point has already been made. David doesn't get to be King because of his looks: in fact it is not because anything about David is kingly at all. It's because God sees something there which no one else can see. It's because God's love penetrates a lot of sins, covers, accepts, forgives, empowers. It's because we live in a state of grace.

The point - the point of the whole Bible - the point of Christianity - is that God's love is not based on the productivity, value or accomplishments of human beings. God loves us for who we are. "Just as we are," all unrealized potential.

We know now about the psychology of grace. If grace is a bit of a stretch for you intellectually, clinical psychology will document its therapeutic reality. We know now that acceptance is very close to the beginning of the healing process; that part of what has to happen is a person's learning to accept, to "own" his or her own feelings; and that it is healing when the therapist does just that, perhaps for the very first time in the individual's entire experience - actually accepts him/her, doesn't judge or condemn or criticize, but accepts.

We know now the reality of grace in physiological terms. Medical science can tell us that there is the power of life in grace and love; that little ones eat more, sleep more, survive more when they are stroked, cuddled, rocked and loved. We know that one of the few things we can do for a newborn addicted to cocaine because of the mother's habit, is to hold on tightly and rock during the hell of withdrawal.

We know now that there is a very elementary cause-and-effect relationship between grace and love. We don't love until we are loved. We enable our children to love by loving them. And we know, I suspect, more than we'd like to admit, about the pain of relationships from which grace is absent: the pain and anger of alienation... waiting for the other to make the first move, responding to one another's sullenness, getting angry at the other's anger, retreating further and further into the contained fortress of self... until the miracle of grace happens and one decides to stop keeping score and calculating offenses and waiting in stubborn resentment for the other to shape up - and simply walks across the room, becomes vulnerable and opens his or her arms and says, "I love you." Grace. The miracle.

And we know, but do not like to know, about the politics and economics of grace. My proposal for the most critical problem immediately confronting our nation - our city - is urban violence. Chicago Tribune columnist, Clarence Page, wrote an excellent editorial last week about the frightening new phenomenon of urban young people killing one another for clothing - the right jacket, for instance. "Chicago may be leading the kill-for-clothes trend" he said. Whatever possesses a youngster to kill another youngster for a jacket I wonder, if it is not a complete absence of the value of human life. Page reflects:

"Poverty alone does not lead into crime. But those who think they have no money or no power undoubtedly have a tough time feeling good about themselves in a society that places so much value on money and power.

"The resulting lack of self-esteem can result in self-destruction, including drugs, crime, street gangs or other hazardous temptations that rush in to fill the self-worth vacuum....

"That might begin to explain," says Page, "why young men in Harlem have a higher death rate than their counterparts in Bangladesh." [Chicago Tribune, 3/21/90]

When there is no grace in the system, when the traditional source of grace - namely stable, loving and accessible families - do not exist and where secondary sources of grace - well funded, safe and effective schools, and social services, even churches - are not visible, accessible or don't exist, then we should not be surprised at not only the inability to love, but the inability to care and the consequent absence of value about life - any life.

We live in a state of grace - or we aren't living much.

In the journey of life there have been people for most of us, who had confidence in us: who saw something in us no one else could see; saw something in us we ourselves didn't know was there, had trouble believing was there. We have been blessed, most of us, by people along the way who in one way or another said "yes" to us, had confidence in us and their confidence had a powerful effect. Almost in spite of ourselves we began to experience a little self-confidence, a little self-esteem. If the teacher thinks I can do it, maybe I can - maybe I can play the solo, memorize the lines, hit the ball, run for president. She thinks I can do this: shinks I could write poetry, do trigonometry, become an astronaut or a neurosurgeon... Maybe there is something here pretty important, at least potentially important. They are our saints - those cheerleaders who urged us on, and whose graceful confidence in us gave us confidence in ourselves.

We are blessed by them along the way. We are blessed by them still. And the astonishing assertion of Christianity is that even if you are not blessed by people who love and accept you and see potential in you and have confidence in you: even if you never have been blessed, there is one who loves you and accepts you and knows everything about you - all your flaws and failures and frailties - and still loves you, still sees your potential, still has confidence in you.

One of the great ironies is that the religion whose purpose it is to announce this good news is often better at reminding us of our shortcomings than reminding us of our value: more eloquent in describing our sin than our potential: more effective in making us feel guilty than giving us confidence for the journey.

The great tragedy is that the Gospel is presented as a courtroom drama and we are on trial - rather than a reunion with the one who loves us unconditionally.

To the psychology of grace, the relationship of grace, the politics of grace - we add the grace of Jesus Christ which says that the one who created you loves you and accepts you and there is nothing you have ever done - or can do - that will change that love and that acceptance.

Oh, you can hide from it. You can ignore it. You can choose to argue with it and about it. You can doubt it, disbelieve it and deny it. But you cannot change it. You can live as if you don't matter to anyone, but it isn't true because you do matter to someone. You can live as if your life has no value, but it isn't true. Your life is valuable to God.

David, back on the very edges of history, was one of the first to learn it. He was also a poet and although we cannot know for certain that he actually wrote Psalms, many of them are attributed to him, including the most beloved of them all, titled "A Psalm of David"...

And I like to think that the opening words:

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..."

have something to do with that day he remembered all his life, when he was out keeping his father's sheep and old Samuel looked him in the eye, this non-descript wisp of a boy, and said - "This is the one."

And I like to think that all his life, on the day his baby died, the day he had to hide from his own troops, the day they told him his beloved son was dead - that David remembered that there was one who loved him and cared about him and had confidence in him.

And I like to remember that 1,000 years later, when Jesus, who had made the blind see, and the lame walk, and the oppressed and beaten down, the unlovely and unloved, stand up straight and tall... when he came riding into the city of Jerusalem one day, the crowds that came out to meet him said, **"Hosanna to the Son of David!"**

And I like to think that as he faced that Holy Week with high intentionality and incredible bravery... and as he died an almost intentional death, alone, that there was a strong confidence which came from his own faith that God's love for him was boundless.

And so, I like to think it is and will be for each of us.

"Amazing Grace! how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see."

Amen.